

EAST CAPITOL STREET
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-681

HABS
DC
WASH,
596-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

EAST CAPITOL STREET

HABS No. DC-681

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596-

Location: This street originates on the east side of the U.S Capitol and extends approximately 1.6 miles due east to the Anacostia River.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks, and the tree spaces between are under the jurisdiction of the D.C. Department of Public Works except for the two blocks between the Capitol and Second Street which are under the jurisdiction of the Architect of the Capitol.

Present Use: Thoroughfare extending due east from the Capitol.

Significance: East Capitol Street, extending east from the Capitol, mirrors the Mall axis west of the Capitol. Pierre L'Enfant envisioned an arcaded market along the roadway, and twentieth-century planners recommended it as a ceremonial axis lined with classical-style government offices. Despite these schemes, East Capitol Street developed as a residential corridor.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792 Ellicott Plan.

2. Alterations and additions:

1871-75: Large federal reservation on East Capitol Street axis between Eleventh and 13th streets landscaped and named Lincoln Park.

1872: Project initiated to pave street with wood block between the Capitol and Eleventh Street.

ca. 1875: Streetcar tracks installed by the Metropolitan Street Railway between First and Ninth streets. Right-of-way divided into 50'-wide roadway flanked by sidewalks, tree spaces, and front yards.

ca. 1880: White elms planted in tree spaces between the sidewalk and roadbed.

1955: East Capitol Street Bridge completed to extend its axis east over the Anacostia River.

1960: Stadium constructed on axis with East Capitol Street on land reclaimed from the Anacostia River.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the city, this roadway emanates due east from the site chosen for the "Congress House." L'Enfant situated the Capitol on one of the highest points in the city, known as Jenkin's Hill, and designed eight

roadways to radiate from it: four diagonal avenues and a street on each of the four compass points. The boulevard leading west from the Capitol was intended as a wide greenway flanked by gardens and prominent homes and was eventually developed as the Mall; to the east, East Capitol Street was to be "160 feet in breadth and a mile in length," flanked by arcaded walks "under whose cover Shops will be most conveniently and agreeably situated."

Topographically, the land over which East Capitol Street was planned was a gentle ridge between two high points--Jenkin's Hill and a hill about a mile east of the Capitol now occupied by Lincoln Park (See HABS No. DC-677). L'Enfant envisioned this latter rise--equal in height to Jenkin's Hill--as the site of a column that would mark the prime meridian for the entire continent. According to a recent study of the historic topography of the city, the base of this column would have been 85' above sea level and easily seen by ships travelling up the Potomac River. East of this rise, the roadway continued on a slight decline toward the Anacostia River, ending in a steep drop at 22nd Street with the land planned for 23rd Street actually within the mud flats along the river bed.¹ L'Enfant's plan also included a circular plaza midway along the stretch between the column site and the river and a bridge over the river on axis with the roadway.

When the first trust deeds were signed in 1791, transferring land for the capital city from its original proprietors, this planned road way traversed several tracts. At its west end, the land set aside for the Capitol Grounds, known as New Troy, belonged to Daniel Carroll. Between Fourth and Seventh streets, the road crossed Houp's Addition, owned by Jonathan Slater. The elevated region in the vicinity of today's Lincoln Park was called the Houpyard, purchased several days before the transfer by speculator George Walker. From about 14th Street to the river, the roadway crossed through tracts called "the Nock" and "Chance," owned by members of the Young family.²

The foundations of the Capitol were laid in 1793 slightly west of the area intended by L'Enfant. The commissioners followed the plans drawn by Andrew Ellicott, the engineer and surveyor hired to complete the city plan after L'Enfant was fired. In addition to altering the Capitol site, Ellicott made many subtle changes to L'Enfant's scheme. Most obviously, he eliminated L'Enfant's notations concerning the column and the arcaded market. His realignment of Massachusetts Avenue moved the Lincoln Park intersection slightly west. He also eliminated the axial bridge and its large forecourt at the water's edge as well as the circular plaza east of Lincoln Park. He added a circular plaza between the Capitol at the intersection of Fourth Street, but as the city developed it was never landscaped as such.

Despite the emphasis L'Enfant placed on this roadway, as the city developed in the early nineteenth century, it remained largely uncleared and unsettled. A map of 1857-61 shows rows of structures facing onto the avenue in its western blocks near the Capitol but almost no development east of Fifth Street. While Washington briefly enjoyed status as a territory between 1871-74, the Board of Public Works undertook a project to pave East Capitol Street with wood blocks from First Street to the federal reservation between Eleventh and 13th streets. During the Civil War, this approximately seven-acre parcel was used as a military

¹ Hawkins, 29.

² McNeil, 43, 47.

hospital. In 1866, shortly after President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, it was officially named Lincoln Park. Improvements began on the park in 1871 and by 1876 it featured meandering paths, flowerbeds, grass and trees, two ornamental fountains with spray jets, a bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln freeing a shackled slave, and an ornate wood lodge with toilets and storage for the watchman in charge of guarding the landscaped oasis.

The improvements to the park, and most likely to the roadway, encouraged residential development on each side of the wide street. According to the parking legislation formalized during Washington's brief period of territorial status in 1871-74, a 50'-wide roadway was paved down the center of the right-of-way leaving 55' on each side of the street to be apportioned into "parking" strips where the city government was responsible for planting trees and laying sidewalks. The remaining land between the sidewalks and property lines could then be landscaped by the occupants of the facing structures. Around 1880, white elms were planted in strips between the sidewalks and roadbeds and as they matured, formed a graceful canopy "like a cathedral nave" over the roadway.³ To serve the growing population along this corridor, the Metropolitan Streetcar Company installed rails along this street between the Capitol and Lincoln Park, which became a destination for tourists desiring to pay homage to the Emancipator.

Predicting that East Capitol Street would become a fashionable residential area, architect and real estate speculator Capt. Albert Grant erected fourteen costly rowhouses on the south side of East Capitol Street between Second and Third streets, but despite the infrastructural amenities--parks, street trees, and a streetcar line, Washington's prominent citizens mostly chose to live in the northwest quadrant, forcing Grant to eventually declare bankruptcy.⁴ Toward the turn of the century, the residential development continued east to the Anacostia River, but the homes were on a more modest scale as Capitol Hill became increasingly middle and working class.

Planners of the twentieth century considered this middle-class, residential street far from the grand boulevard intended by Pierre L'Enfant, and repeatedly proposed its redevelopment as an impressive corridor. By the 1920s, East Capitol Street was, for the most part, lined with rowhouses, and in 1923 ground was broken for Anacostia Park, a large recreational area planned on the flats and marshes reclaimed from the Anacostia River. In 1924 Frederick Adams Delano and the Committee of 100, a citizens arm of the National Civic Association, recommended erecting federal office buildings around Lincoln Square.⁵ Lincoln Park lost much of its draw when the Lincoln Memorial--completed in West Potomac Park in 1922--became the new site to honor the sixteenth president.

In consideration of the additional parkland at the east end of the street, the 1928 comprehensive plan of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCP&PC) included not only a federal enclave around Lincoln Park, but a scheme to rename East Capitol Street "the Avenue of the States" and line it with

³ Solotaroff, 40.

⁴ Goode, 151.

⁵ Thiry, 37.

monumental structures.⁶ One of the only buildings constructed according to this plan was the Folger Shakespeare Library, completed in 1932 on the south side of East Capitol Street between Second and Third streets.

Meanwhile, the reclamation of the land at the east end of the route called for tangible planning. A regional park plan approved by the NCP&PC and the Commission of Fine Arts in joint session in 1939 included a National Sports Center that would utilize 200 acres of the land reclaimed from the Anacostia River. In the plan, the road axis would be flanked by the National Guard Armory, to the south and a stadium to the north. On axis with the street was a 35-acre sports field and parade ground facing Kingman Lake, a man-made body of water to be developed for aquatic sports. The complex of buildings and open space was intended to "accommodate the Olympic games and national celebrations requiring space and facilities for large aggregations of people and cars."⁷

In the midst of World War II, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission compiled a wish list for major improvements to Washington and the first project on the item list was the "Development of East Capitol Street, from the Capitol East to the Anacostia," described as follows:

This will connect with the Mall to the West of the Capitol, and thus make a great central composition for the National Capital fully five miles in length, which will be unexcelled by that of any capital city in the world. The buildings along East Capitol Street would be in marble or granite, similar to the Folger Shakespeare Library and the proposed Army Medical Museum and Library Building."⁸

The second item on the list was the construction of a national stadium at the east end of East Capitol Street. A plan for the roadway approved by the Commission of Fine Arts in 1946 set the right-of-way at 240' wide with a 52'-wide sodded panel down the center flanked by 32'-wide roadways.⁹ Although this scheme was never carried out, the plans for the east end of the corridor at Anacostia Park were implemented over the next decades. By the end of the 1940s, a sports field at the end of the avenue had been drained and graded by the National Park Service, and the National Guard Armory constructed on the south side of the East Capitol Street axis.¹⁰ Between 1951-55 the East Capitol Street Bridge was completed to extend the axis of the street over the Anacostia River, finally in accord with L'Enfant's scheme. The approaches to the bridge inscribed a huge open space in which the Robert F. Kennedy Stadium was erected in the 1960s.

Despite the presence of the large stadium complex, the roadway remains relatively unchanged. Less than thirty years after its construction, the stadium has been criticized as too small to accommodate the city's popular football team and its

⁶ Thiry, 37.

⁷ Peaslee, 130.

⁸ Projects for Future Development of the National Capital National Archives RG66 general files box 80, ca. 1942.

⁹ Commission of Fine Arts, 27-28.

¹⁰ Peaslee, 130.

fans, and proposals are still being considered for the construction of a new, larger stadium on a nearby site northeast of the old stadium.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: The right-of-way for East Capitol Street is 160' wide from building line to building line, and it is approximately 1.6 miles from the Capitol to the Stadium-Armory Grounds. Within the historic city, it covers approximately 29 acres.
- B. Elements within the right-of-way:
 - 1. Roadway: A 50'-wide paved roadbed comprised of two lanes of two-way traffic runs the length of the right-of-way, except between Eleventh and 13th streets where it is diverted around Lincoln Park.
 - 2. Sidewalks and street trees: Mature elms line the roadway, which is illuminated by highway lamps.
 - 3. Reservations:
 - a. Between Eleventh and 13th streets, the roadway is diverted around Lincoln Park (see HABS No. DC-677).
 - b. Within the historic city, the roadway terminates at Anacostia Park, Reservation No. 343, on the west side of the Anacostia River.
- C. Framing elements: The right-of-way is for the most part framed by three- and four-story residences and low-rise apartment buildings.
- D. Vistas: As an extension of the Mall, East Capitol Street is located on primary axis of the entire city scheme. The U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument are visible from many points on the roadway and from Lincoln Park and RFK Stadium.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Maps:
 - Army Corps of Engineers. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.
 - Baist, G. W. "Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, D. C." Philadelphia, 1887, 1903, 1913, 1919, 1924, 1932, 1939, 1956, and 1968.
 - Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.
 - Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

B. Early Views:

- ca. 1880: Photograph of Grant's Row townhouses on the south side of East Capitol Street between Second and Third streets (Goode, 151).
- ca. 1911: Photograph looking west to the Capitol dome from near Sixth Street (Solotaroff, 40).
- ca. 1931: Photograph of unidentified block on East Capitol Street showing tree canopy and streetcar tracks (Caemmerer, 119).
- ca. 1948: Aerial view of Washington looking west along East Capitol Street axis (Commission of Fine Arts, frontispiece).

C. Bibliography:

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Goode, James M. Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.

Hawkins, Don Alexander. "The Landscape of the Federal City: A 1792 Walking Tour." Washington History Vol. 3 Spring/Summer, 1991.

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Peaslee, Horace W. "East Capitol Street Bridge." Landscape Architecture 40 (April 1950) 130.

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Thiry, Paul. "The Washington Plan: Historic Notes." AIA Journal (January 1963) 35-38.

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Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1948.

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1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.

PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Page 8, 9 Mid twentieth century plans for the redevelopment of East Capitol Street.



